

METHOD FOR ESTABLISHING A DRIVE IMAGE IN A
COMPUTING ENVIRONMENT

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INS. AI ~~METHOD FOR ESTABLISHING A DRIVE IMAGE IN A
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CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

5 This application claims the benefit of provisional U.S. Application Serial No. 60/282,111, filed April 7, 2001, and titled "Method for Establishing a Drive Image in a Computing Environment," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates in general to the field of computer systems, and, more particularly, to a method for storing data to block-level data storage devices.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Computers include general purpose central processing units (CPUs) that are designed to execute a specific set of system instructions. A group of processors that have similar architecture or design specifications may be considered to be members of the same processor family. Examples of current processor families include the Motorola 680X0 processor family, manufactured by Motorola, Inc. of Phoenix, Arizona; the Intel 80X86 processor family, manufactured by Intel Corporation of Sunnyvale, California; and the PowerPC processor family, which is manufactured by Motorola, Inc. and used in computers manufactured by Apple Computer, Inc. of Cupertino, California. Although a group of processors may be in the same family because of their similar architecture and design considerations, processors may vary widely within a family according to their clock speed and other performance parameters.

Each family of microprocessors executes instructions that are unique to the processor family. The collective set of instructions that a processor or family of processors can execute is known as the processor's instruction set. As an example, the instruction set used by the Intel 80X86 processor family is incompatible with the instruction set used by the PowerPC processor family. The Intel 80X86 instruction set is based on the Complex Instruction Set Computer (CISC) format. The Motorola PowerPC instruction set is based on the Reduced

Instruction Set Computer (RISC) format. CISC processors use a large number of instructions, some of which can perform rather complicated functions, but which require generally many clock cycles to execute. RISC processors use a smaller number of available instructions to perform a simpler set of functions that are executed at a much higher rate.

5 The uniqueness of the processor family among computer systems also typically results in incompatibility among the other elements of hardware architecture of the computer systems. A computer system manufactured with a processor from the Intel 80X86 processor family will have a hardware architecture that is different from the hardware architecture of a computer system manufactured with a processor from the PowerPC processor family. Because of the uniqueness of the processor instruction set and a computer system's hardware architecture, application software programs are typically written to run on a particular computer system running a particular operating system.

10 A computer manufacturer will attempt to maximize its market share by having more rather than fewer applications run on the microprocessor family associated with the computer manufacturer's product line. To expand the number of operating systems and application programs that can run on a computer system, a field of technology has developed in which a given computer having one type of CPU, called a host, will include an emulator program that allows the host computer to emulate the instructions of an unrelated type of CPU, called a guest. Thus, the host computer will execute an application that will cause one or more host
15 instructions to be called in response to a given guest instruction. Thus, the host computer can both run software designed for its own hardware architecture and software written for computers having an unrelated hardware architecture. As a more specific example, a computer system manufactured by Apple Computer, for example, may run operating systems and program written for PC-based computer systems. It may also be possible to use an emulator program to operate
20 concurrently on a single CPU multiple incompatible operating systems. In this arrangement, although each operating system is incompatible with the other, an emulator program can host one of the two operating systems, allowing the otherwise incompatible operating systems to run concurrently on the same computer system.

INS · AZ → When a guest computer system is emulated on a host computer system, the guest computer system is said to be a virtual machine, as the host computer system exists only as a software representation of the operation of the hardware architecture of the guest computer system. The terms emulator and virtual machine are sometimes used interchangeably to denote the ability to mimic or emulate the hardware architecture of an entire computer system. As an example, the Virtual PC software created by Connectix Corporation of San Mateo, California emulates an entire computer that includes an Intel 80X86 Pentium processor and various motherboard components and cards. The operation of these components is emulated in the virtual machine that is being run on the host machine. An emulator program executing on the operating system software and hardware architecture of the host computer, such as a computer system having a PowerPC processor, mimics the operation of the entire guest computer system. The emulator program acts as the interchange between the hardware architecture of the host machine and the instructions transmitted by the software running within the emulated environment.

The hard drives and floppy drives of a computer system are known as block devices. A block device is any device, including any memory device, within a computer system that transfers a defined minimum number of bytes of data as part of each access to the device. The defined minimum number of bytes of data is known as a sector or block. Data is stored in the block device in fixed size blocks or sectors of data. Each sector or block within a block device is the same size. In the case of a hard drive, each block or sector is typically 512 bytes in length. The entire block of data must be transferred in the case of an access to any single data element within the block. In the case of a hard drive, for example, the 512 bytes of data, the size of one block, must be passed to main memory, even if only a single byte of the block is part of the read operation. Thus, data must be read from or written to memory in multiples of the block size. Each block of the block device has a unique address. Each block of a block device can be accessed independently and in random access order. Typically, the addressing scheme will involve designating the first block as block 0. Successive blocks are consecutively numbered.

Emulated computer systems typically involve the use of a virtual hard drive image. Some emulated operating systems, such as some Windows operating systems, expect to

boot from a hard drive that is a block device. To emulate for the guest operating system the presence of a physical hard drive, the emulation program creates a virtual hard drive image. The emulation program will present the virtual hard drive image to the guest operating system. The guest operating system will boot from the virtual hard drive image and will refer to the virtual
5 hard drive image for all other functions necessitating reading from or writing to a hard drive. The virtual hard drive image often exists as a single file on the physical hard drive of the computer system. Thus, the entire content of the virtual hard drive of the guest computer system are represented as a single file on the physical hard drive of the computer system.

One possible format for a virtual hard drive is a single file that that has a fixed size, flat-mapped format in which the data of the virtual hard drive is laid out on physical hard drive by block address. The data at block 0 of the virtual hard drive is at the start of the file, and continues with the data for block 1 and the next successive blocks. For fixed size virtual hard drive images, the size of the file for the virtual hard drive is as large as the size of the hard drive being emulated. For example, a fixed size virtual hard drive that is 2 gigabytes (GB) in size will occupy a file on the physical hard drive of the computer system that is 2 GB in size.

A second possible format for a virtual hard drive is a single file that has a dynamically expanding format. The dynamically expanding file includes header information that describes the internal data structures of the file. Unlike the fixed size file, the only blocks that are included in the dynamically expanding file are those blocks that have been written to by the
20 emulated computer system. Those blocks that have not been written to are not included in the dynamically expanding file and are assumed to be zeroed. Thus, if the emulated computer system attempts to read from a block of the dynamically expanding file that has not yet been written to, and is not represented in the dynamically expanding file, the emulation program will return to the emulated computer system a block containing all zeros. As new blocks are written
25 to by the emulated computer system, the dynamically expanding file expands to accommodate the newly written block.

The header information of the dynamically expanding file identifies the location of each block in the file. Because blocks are not written to in a sequential manner that tracks the numbering scheme for the available blocks of the virtual hard drive, the header information will

track the location of the blocks without regard to their sequential numbering scheme. For example, the data of block 0 may be placed adjacent to the data of block 100 and may be followed by the data of block 50. As such, the location of the blocks in the dynamically expanding file tracks the sequence the sequence that the blocks were written to, rather than tracking the sequence the sequential addressing scheme for the blocks. The header information also includes a bit map. Each bit on the bit map corresponds to an available block of the virtual hard drive. If a bit is a logical 1, the block corresponding to the bit has been written to, and therefore is included in the dynamically expanding file; If a bit is a logical 0, the block corresponding to the bit has not been written to, and is therefore not represented in the dynamically expanding file. Aside from the bit map technique for identifying written blocks in the virtual hard drive, other data structures may be used in the header information of the dynamically expanding file for coordinating the blocks of the virtual hard drive.

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100 101 102 103 104 105 106 107 108 109 110 111 112 113 114 115 116 117 118 119 120 121 122 123 124 125 126 127 128 129 130 131 132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139 140 141 142 143 144 145 146 147 148 149 150 151 152 153 154 155 156 157 158 159 160 161 162 163 164 165 166 167 168 169 170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182 183 184 185 186 187 188 189 190 191 192 193 194 195 196 197 198 199 200 201 202 203 204 205 206 207 208 209 210 211 212 213 214 215 216 217 218 219 220 221 222 223 224 225 226 227 228 229 230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237 238 239 240 241 242 243 244 245 246 247 248 249 250 251 252 253 254 255 256 257 258 259 260 261 262 263 264 265 266 267 268 269 270 271 272 273 274 275 276 277 278 279 280 281 282 283 284 285 286 287 288 289 290 291 292 293 294 295 296 297 298 299 300 301 302 303 304 305 306 307 308 309 310 311 312 313 314 315 316 317 318 319 320 321 322 323 324 325 326 327 328 329 330 331 332 333 334 335 336 337 338 339 340 341 342 343 344 345 346 347 348 349 350 351 352 353 354 355 356 357 358 359 360 361 362 363 364 365 366 367 368 369 370 371 372 373 374 375 376 377 378 379 380 381 382 383 384 385 386 387 388 389 390 391 392 393 394 395 396 397 398 399 400 401 402 403 404 405 406 407 408 409 410 411 412 413 414 415 416 417 418 419 420 421 422 423 424 425 426 427 428 429 430 431 432 433 434 435 436 437 438 439 440 441 442 443 444 445 446 447 448 449 450 451 452 453 454 455 456 457 458 459 460 461 462 463 464 465 466 467 468 469 470 471 472 473 474 475 476 477 478 479 480 481 482 483 484 485 486 487 488 489 490 491 492 493 494 495 496 497 498 499 500 501 502 503 504 505 506 507 508 509 510 511 512 513 514 515 516 517 518 519 520 521 522 523 524 525 526 527 528 529 530 531 532 533 534 535 536 537 538 539 540 541 542 543 544 545 546 547 548 549 550 551 552 553 554 555 556 557 558 559 560 561 562 563 564 565 566 567 568 569 570 571 572 573 574 575 576 577 578 579 580 581 582 583 584 585 586 587 588 589 590 591 592 593 594 595 596 597 598 599 600 601 602 603 604 605 606 607 608 609 610 611 612 613 614 615 616 617 618 619 620 621 622 623 624 625 626 627 628 629 630 631 632 633 634 635 636 637 638 639 640 641 642 643 644 645 646 647 648 649 650 651 652 653 654 655 656 657 658 659 660 661 662 663 664 665 666 667 668 669 670 671 672 673 674 675 676 677 678 679 680 681 682 683 684 685 686 687 688 689 690 691 692 693 694 695 696 697 698 699 700 701 702 703 704 705 706 707 708 709 710 711 712 713 714 715 716 717 718 719 720 721 722 723 724 725 726 727 728 729 730 731 732 733 734 735 736 737 738 739 740 741 742 743 744 745 746 747 748 749 750 751 752 753 754 755 756 757 758 759 760 761 762 763 764 765 766 767 768 769 770 771 772 773 774 775 776 777 778 779 780 781 782 783 784 785 786 787 788 789 790 791 792 793 794 795 796 797 798 799 800 801 802 803 804 805 806 807 808 809 810 811 812 813 814 815 816 817 818 819 820 821 822 823 824 825 826 827 828 829 830 831 832 833 834 835 836 837 838 839 840 841 842 843 844 845 846 847 848 849 850 851 852 853 854 855 856 857 858 859 860 861 862 863 864 865 866 867 868 869 870 871 872 873 874 875 876 877 878 879 880 881 882 883 884 885 886 887 888 889 890 891 892 893 894 895 896 897 898 899 900 901 902 903 904 905 906 907 908 909 910 911 912 913 914 915 916 917 918 919 920 921 922 923 924 925 926 927 928 929 930 931 932 933 934 935 936 937 938 939 940 941 942 943 944 945 946 947 948 949 950 951 952 953 954 955 956 957 958 959 960 961 962 963 964 965 966 967 968 969 970 971 972 973 974 975 976 977 978 979 980 981 982 983 984 985 986 987 988 989 990 991 992 993 994 995 996 997 998 999 1000 1001 1002 1003 1004 1005 1006 1007 1008 1009 1010 1011 1012 1013 1014 1015 1016 1017 1018 1019 1020 1021 1022 1023 1024 1025 1026 1027 1028 1029 1030 1031 1032 1033 1034 1035 1036 1037 1038 1039 1040 1041 1042 1043 1044

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention concerns a method for establishing a drive image in an emulated computer system. The virtual hard drive of the emulated computer system includes a parent drive and at least one differencing drive. Both the parent drive and the differencing drive are represented on physical hard drive of the host computer system as a single file. Writes by the emulated computer system to the virtual hard drive are recorded in the memory space of the differencing drive, which expands to accommodate writes to the differencing drive. Included in the differencing drive is a bit map for identifying the blocks of the virtual hard drive that have been written to or recorded in the differencing drive. The differencing drives of the present invention may be cascaded. A differencing drive may be added such that the original differencing drive is the parent of the newly added differencing drive. When the target drive for write operations is switched to the newly added differencing drive, the content of the original differencing drive is fixed and writes to the virtual hard drive by the emulated computer system are made to the newly added differencing drive.

10 20 The virtual hard drive of the present invention may be used as a means of protecting or preserving the content of a hard drive image outside the emulating computing environment. The technique of the present invention may be used in a traditional single-user computing environment to preserve the protect the content of the hard drive during sensitive computing operations. In the networked computing environment, a single parent drive may be shared by several client computers. The parent drive may be maintained at a server computer and each of the client computers may include a differencing drive that includes the writes made by the client computer to the parent drive of the server computer.

25 The method disclosed herein is advantageous in that it provides for the preservation of a memory space in a computing environment. Changes to the memory space are made in an adjacent file. Because the original memory space is preserved, the user can choose to roll the status of the memory space back to its original state. This is accomplished by simply discarding or ignoring the content of the differencing drive. In the case of cascaded drives, successive differencing drives may be used to track successive changes to the content of the

The method disclosed herein is also advantageous in that it can be used in single-user computing environment and the networked computing environment, in addition to use of the method in the emulated computing environment. In the single-user environment, the method is advantageous in that the technique can be used to protect the content of the memory space of the computer system during sensitive computing operations or when the system is at risk of a virus. In the networked computing environment, each of several clients can write to a memory location maintained by a server computer. The changes are not made to the central memory location. Rather, changes are made to differencing drives that are unique to each client computer and are stored at the client computers or at the server computer.

Other technical advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent to one skilled in the art from the following figures, descriptions, and claims.

A more complete understanding of the present invention and advantages thereof may be acquired by referring to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which like reference numbers indicate like features, and wherein:

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Figure 3 is a flow diagram of a process for using a differencing drive to create an undoable hard drive in an emulated computer environment;

Figure 4 is a diagram of the logical relationship of a physical hard drive, parent drive, and multiple differencing drives; and

Figure 5 is a diagram of a networked computer system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides an emulation environment in which a differencing drive may be used to define the content of the virtual hard drive of the emulated computer system. A differencing drive is a file or a series of files that tracks the altered content of another hard drive, such as a physical hard drive or, in the emulated environment, a virtual hard drive. In the case of a virtual hard drive, a differencing drive may be used in conjunction with both fixed size virtual hard drives and dynamically expanding virtual hard drives. The present invention also has application outside the emulated computing environment and may be used in any computing environment in which it is desired to track the content of a drive image through a differencing drive that tracks the altered content of the parent drive image.

With respect to the emulated computing environment, shown in Figure 1 is a diagram of the logical layers of the hardware and software architecture for an emulated operating environment in a computer system 10. An emulation program 14 runs on a host operating system 12 and host hardware architecture 11. Emulation program 14 emulates a guest computer system 16, including a guest operating system 18. A guest software application 20 runs on guest operating system 18. In the emulated operating environment of Figure 1, because of the operation of emulation program 14, guest software application 20 can run on the computer system 10 even though guest software application 20 is designed to run on an operating system that is generally incompatible with the host operating system 12 and host hardware architecture 11.

Shown in Figure 2 is the logical relationship between a drive image 202 and a corresponding differencing drive 204. As shown in Figure 2, both the drive image 202 and the differencing drive 204 are represented on the physical hard drive 206 as a single file. Differencing drive 204 supplements and tracks the content of drive image 202. In this relationship, drive image 202 is the parent drive of differencing drive 204. Together, drive image 202 and differencing drive 204 comprise a single virtual hard drive 208 for use by the emulated computer system. The guest operating system 18 (Figure 1), however, still views drive image 202 as the hard drive of the emulated computer system.

When the emulated computer system is initialized, the differencing drive is empty except for the presence of header information. When the guest operating system attempts to write to the drive image, the block or blocks of the write operation are not written to the drive image. Rather, the block or blocks of the write operation are written to the differencing drive.

5 To accommodate the size of the block or blocks of the write operation, the differencing drive expands to accommodate the block or blocks of the write operation. As part of the write operation, the header information of the differencing drive is updated to reflect the content of the differencing drive. Like a dynamically expanding drive, the differencing drive includes a bit map. In the case of a differencing drive, each bit of the bit map corresponds to one of the available blocks of the virtual hard drive. If a bit of the bit map of the differencing drive is a logical 1, the content of the corresponding block has been written to and is present in the differencing drive. If a bit of the bit map of the differencing drive is a logical 0, the content of the corresponding block either has not been written to or the content of the corresponding block can be found in the parent drive of the differencing drive. Although the differencing drive performs in many ways like a dynamically expanding drive, the differencing drive can be a complement to either a fixed size drive as a parent drive or a dynamically expanding drive as a parent drive.

One potential application for a differencing drive is in the case of undoable hard drives in emulated computing environments. Shown in Figure 3 is a flow diagram of a process
20 for using a differencing drive to create an undoable hard drive in an emulated computer environment. Upon initialization of the emulated computer system at step 302, the emulation program will create at step 304 a virtual hard drive that is comprised of a parent drive and a differencing drive. The user of the emulated computer system may not know that a differencing drive is being used as an element of the virtual hard drive of the computer system. As the user
25 uses the emulated computer system in a manner that causes write operations (step 306) to the virtual hard drive, the file that makes up the differencing drive is populated at step 308 to accommodate the content of the write operations to the virtual hard drive. After the user has completed the emulated computing session, the user is prompted at step 310 and is asked

whether the user would like to undo the transactions made to the hard drive during the emulated computing session.

If the user determines at step 312 that the user would prefer to undo any writes made to the virtual hard drive during the emulated computing session, the content of the differencing drive is ignored at step 314 and the content of the parent drive is assumed to form the entire content of the virtual hard drive. If, however, the user determines at step 312 that the user would prefer not to undo the writes made to the virtual hard drive during the emulating computing session, a synchronization step is performed at step 316 to synchronize the content of the parent drive to the content of the differencing drive. The synchronization step involves writing to the parent drive those blocks that are present in the differencing drive. As part of the synchronization step, if a block found in the differencing drive is also present in the parent drive, the block in the parent drive is overwritten with the content of the block in the differencing drive. If a block found in the differencing drive is not found in the parent drive, the block of the differencing drive is written to the parent drive as part of the synchronization step.

In the example of Figure 3, the user is prompted to undo the content of the virtual hard drive at the end of a computer session. In addition, the user may be prompted to undo the content of the virtual hard drive at regular intervals. As an example, the user may be prompted at one hour intervals to reconcile the content of the virtual hard drive. In this manner, for extended computing sessions, the differencing drive is not allowed to expand unreasonably as additional write operations are made to the virtual hard drive. If the parent drive is a fixed-size drive, it may be desirable to undo or reconcile the virtual hard drive at regular intervals during a lengthy computer session to avoid having an excessive and unnecessary amount of space on the physical hard drive devoted to the virtual hard drive of the emulated computer system.

As another implementation of the present invention, the differencing drives may be cascaded such that the virtual hard drive include a parent drive and multiple differencing drives. In such an arrangement, the first drive is referred to as the ultimate parent drive. The ultimate parent drive does not serve as a referencing drive for any other drive. In contrast, a differencing drive may be a parent drive for another differencing drive. In this scenario, differencing drives may be established over time, with each differencing drive referring to the

prior drive or the ultimate parent drive as its parent drive. Shown in Figure 4 is a logical diagram of an ultimate parent drive 402 and several differencing drives 404. In the example of Figure 4, the user is given the option of creating additional differencing drives during the computing session. Each newly created differencing drives refers as a parent to the ultimate parent drive, if the differencing drive is the first differencing drive created, or to the prior differencing drive, if the differencing drive is not the first differencing drive created. In Figure 4, once Differencing Drive B is initiated by the user, the emulation program freezes the content of Differencing Drive A and instead begins writing new content to Differencing Drive B. Similarly, once Differencing Drive C is initiated by the user, the emulation programs stops writing content to Differencing Drive B and begins using Differencing Drive C as the location for write operations to the virtual hard drive.

When the operating system wants to do a read operation from a virtual hard drive, the emulation program directs the operating system to the proper differencing drive for the read operation. The emulation program searches the header information of each differencing drive, beginning with the most recently created differencing drive and continuing to the ultimate parent drive, until the emulation program locates an entry for the requested block. If the user chooses to reconcile the differencing drives into a single parent drive, the emulation program determines, for each block of the virtual hard drive, whether that block of the virtual hard drive has been written to in one of the differencing drives. If the block has been written to in one of the differencing drives, the emulation program selects the block from the most recently created differencing drive and copies that block to the ultimate parent drive, overwriting if necessary the data in the block of the ultimate parent drive.

The cascading of several differencing drives allows the computer user to protect the content of the virtual hard drive during the computing session. This feature is especially advantageous whenever it is desirable for the user to be able to revert back to the content of the hard drive at a prior time in the computing session. This feature may be used, for example, in the software installation process. The user, prior to begin a software install, may choose to initiate a cascading differencing drive that refers, depending on the sequence of its initiation, to a parent drive or another differencing drive as its parent drive. In this manner, if the installed software

interferes with the integrity of the system or with the operation of other system software or hardware, the user can easily revert to the state of the virtual hard drive prior to the installation of the software, without having to run an uninstall utility on the recently installed software application. Similarly, the user may choose to initiate another differencing drive when there is a danger or suspicion that the activity of the user may allow a virus to enter the computer system. In this way, an original disk image may remain in a pristine, unmodified state, while the user is allowed to roll back the contents of the virtual hard drive when the content of one or more differencing drives is no longer wanted or needed.

The automated use of cascaded differencing drives may be used to create, at regular intervals, a series of differencing drives, allowing the user to roll back the content of the virtual hard drive if the user later experiences a computer system problem. In this example, a differencing drive may be created for the user once per hour. Although the creation of a series of automated differencing drives may occur in the background, the time interval for the creation of a differencing drive may be specified by the user.

The use of differencing drives also allows a single parent drive to be shared among several virtual computer systems. The several computer systems in this example may be running on the same host machine or may be running on separate host machines or a shared network connection. Shown in Figure 5 is a network diagram in which several computer systems 502 (client systems) may be connected as part of a client server network 504 to a data or storage server 506. The use of differencing drives avoids the necessity of storing common data on each of client computer systems 502. Rather, client computer systems 502 can access common, static content existing on storage server 506. In this example, the parent drive is in storage server 506. Only the differences to the content of storage server 506 must be recorded in the differencing drive. If one of the client computer systems 502 performs a write operation to the storage server 506, the text of the storage request is written to a differencing drive, which may be stored, depending on the implementation of the computer network, in a differencing drive in the local memory of one of the client computer systems 502 or in a memory location at the data or storage server 506.

Differencing drives may be used outside of the context of emulated computer systems, and may be used in computing environments in which access to the parent drive is much slower than access to the differencing drive. In the case of client server network 504, for example, the access to data stored in storage server 506 may be much slower than access to data stored locally at one of client computer systems 502. Modified, frequently accessed data is stored locally in the differencing drive at client computer systems 502, allowing the client computer systems to access this data more quickly than can be done through the network connection.

A differencing drive may be used in any computing environment, including use on a standalone personal computer, in which it is desirable that one drive image (the parent drive) remains unchanged while altered content that is intended to be written to the memory location of the drive image is instead written to a second file (differencing drive). As an example, a personal computer may include more than one block device, allowing one block device to function as the parent drive, and the second block device to function as the differencing drive. In this arrangement, the first block device can remain in a pristine and unaltered state while all writes operations are made to the second block device. At some later time, the content of the two block devices can be synchronized or the content of the second block device can be disregarded to allow the computer user to return to the content of the first block device as it existed at some point in the computing session. As in the case of an emulated computing environment, cascaded differencing drives may be used in the case of the non-emulated computing environment.

The use of a differencing drive is advantageous in that it provides for a data structure in which writes to a virtual hard drive are instead written to a single file that dynamically expands to include all of the changes to the parent drive. The use of a differencing drive is largely transparent to the computer user in that the computer user is not aware that writes are being made to a file that comprises the differencing drive rather than to the parent drive of the virtual hard drive.

The present invention is not limited in its application to the emulation of a particular computer system architecture, particularly the Intel 80X86 architecture. Rather, the

emulation technique disclosed herein is applicable any time it is desirable that a host operating system be transparently disconnected from the processor with respect to at least some of the processor settings of the processor.

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